

Chariho District Financial Meeting/Public Budget Hearing  
March 5, 2024

Committee Members Present: Chair Catherine Giusti, Vice Chair Karen Reynolds, Donna Chambers, Tyler Champlin, Kathryn Colasante, Polly Hopkins, Craig Louzon, Linda Lyall, Andrew McQuaide, Larry Phelps, Patricia Pouliot and Jessica Purcell.

Administrators Present: Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Michael Comella, Director of Administration and Finance Ned Draper, Assistant Director of Administration and Finance Lynn Gouvin and Systems Administrator Eric O'Brien. Also in attendance: School Committee Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz.

Charlestown Moderator Charlie Beck called the Chariho District Financial Meeting/Public Budget Hearing, which was held in the Chariho Middle School auditorium, to order at 7:54 PM. He introduced himself and welcomed all to the Chariho Budget Hearing. He then asked all to please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silent meditation. He pointed out the exits in the event of an emergency evacuation and noted there was a quorum in each town. He then reviewed the rules of the meeting asking that speakers be treated with respect and courtesy. Anyone wishing to speak must approach the microphone and publicly announce their name and town of residence for the record. He would like speakers to keep their comments to five minutes or less. He will go around the room once and then circle back around again. This will give everyone the opportunity to speak. As this is a Public Hearing, the School Committee will take comments made by the public regarding the budget into consideration. There will be no votes taken this evening on the budget. The budget will be voted on at the All-Day Referendum scheduled for April 9. He asked for a motion to waive the reading of the Warrant. A motion was made, seconded and approved to waive the reading of the Warrant. He then asked for a motion to waive the reading of last year's minutes. A motion was made, seconded and approved to waive the reading of last year's minutes. Moderator Beck introduced School Committee Chair Catherine Giusti who recognized fellow School Committee members and Administrators on stage. She thanked all for attending the meeting.

I. Public Comment on the Budget - Moderator Beck reminded all that the first item for discussion is the budget. Scott Bill Hirst, Vice President of the Hopkinton Town Council, noted that he is speaking on his own, what he says is not the opinion of his Town Council. He again requested that the District consider a site management study to address fixed costs as 80% of the budget in Richmond is for education with Hopkinton at 79%. A majority of each of the towns' budgets goes to education. How will the School Committee address the issue? The towns have things they need to do. This needs to be a two-way street; it seems to be one-way. There is one Hopkinton Council member who thinks the towns should pay but we can't because only the School Committee can ask for the outside study. Get the results and analyze it. Please, please, please consider it. Thank you. David Bengston from Richmond noted that his son graduated from Chariho. The kids who started Kindergarten this past fall will graduate in 2037. We need to be educating them for the 2040s and 2050s, not the 1950s. URI President Dave Dooley would tell parents that the university is "educating students for jobs that don't exist yet." Chariho needs to do the same thing and we have a responsibility to support that. Sharon Davis from Hopkinton asked for clarification on Hope Valley Elementary School. Is Hopkinton paying the entire cost or are the three towns paying to which the Moderator explained that each town pays according to enrollment. Samantha Wilcox, a Richmond Town Council member, stated that she is speaking for herself and not the Council. She commented that while it wouldn't be popular among those in Hope Valley Elementary School, it is the right decision fiscally to begin the move to close the 90-year-old school regardless of whether new construction is approved at a referendum or not. By phasing out Kindergarten next year, the District will save \$437,800 and will realize more savings as years go on. Closing a school is not an easy decision and the locations hold tremendous sentimental value to many people. The decision made to increase the budget to keep Hope Valley open for one more year is not fiscally responsible and especially with the declining

enrollment, we cannot afford to continue to keep this school open. In Richmond, those councilors who voted for the legislation did so because they wanted the voters to get the chance to vote. Last year, Richmond's budget failed. Some voted against it because they wanted more reductions while others voted against it because they wanted more added. There is no way to know why this failed. She is cautioning the District that the same thing can happen if Hope Valley School phase-out does not begin this year. People may vote against the budget for this reason. Charlestown resident Frances Topping stated that she knows it is hard for those on a limited budget but education is paramount; the most important thing we can do for our students. Ron Areglado from Charlestown thanked administration and teachers for providing an excellent education for our children. He has heard a lot of conversation about a management study but he challenged the towns to do more to consider what is actually driving the fixed costs. Mr. Hirst talked about this is a two-way street. Ron stated he thinks the town should look at a strategic plan instead to see why the costs are going up. If you look at the trends, there is a considerably disproportionate number of people moving to certain towns and not to others. You can't ask for more cuts when you are driving the budget up by the variables involved. He commended all for what they are doing and asked that the budget be supported. Thank you. Don Panciera from Hopkinton stated that children don't learn from a building; they learn from the dedicated teachers. Taxes are high and we need to get the budget down. He suggested Open Houses be held so people can look at the schools to see what needs to be replaced. He sees nothing wrong with a management study; it is not meant to be critical. He respects everyone's opinion; this is his. Michael Chambers from Charlestown noted that every year he stands there and supports the budget. There is communication to parents as to how their money is being spent. Adults vote; kids don't vote. Do they want better schools? He thinks it is important for parents and taxpayers to watch out for their children. Jim McCabe from Charlestown commented that Hopkinton will exceed the 4% cap and will need General Assembly to approve it. He would like to support the budget but adding Hope Valley Kindergarten back has put Hopkinton over what is allowed. Ned explained that the Town of Hopkinton would have to ask for relief. Mr. McCabe questioned what happens if the General Assembly doesn't approve it? Gina replied that Hopkinton will have to figure this out.

II. Shall there be established a regional School District Building Committee... Moderator Beck asked the Superintendent to explain this item. She noted the following from the Chariho Act. "No action shall be taken with respect to the purchase of land, the construction of buildings and the extension of the scope of functions of the regional school district except upon a majority vote of voters of the respective member towns. The regional school district building committee will consist of four (4) members from each of the towns of Charlestown, Richmond and Hopkinton with one (1) member of which building committee from each member town shall be a member of the school committee in their respective town, and the remaining members shall be appointed by the respective town councils. The term of said building committee shall be until such time as the authorized building or buildings shall have been constructed and accepted by the architects engaged by the building committee and for (1) year thereafter whereupon the term of office of said committee shall terminate. If the bond fails, the process will be discontinued. Louise Dinsmore asked what are they voting on – just the formation of a building committee, not the people, to which Gina replied she is correct. The letter will go to the Town Councils for their appointments. Louise clarified that this vote will establish a building committee if the bond passes. Gina explained the reason this is being done now is if the bond passes in May, they would have to hold another District Meeting with the required quorum. Holding the vote now saves time and money. Michael Chambers began discussing a fire at a school that occurred on December 1, 1958 at which time Moderator Beck noted that this is not pertinent to the agenda item. Ed Lowe from Hopkinton stated he had two points to make. The building committee would be selected by the Town Councils and the School Committee will select one member per town to which Gina responded that the towns will select three individuals who reside in their respective town. They can select anyone they want. Ed questioned the term of the building committee; what is the deadline that it needs to be up and running. Gina replied that, per the Chariho Act, once the building plan is approved, State law says we have to have the building committee in place. There is a little confusion between the State's requirement and the Chariho Act so what was required by the State we called the Necessity for School Construction Committee so as to not confuse the two. Ed

asked why wasn't the building committee started for Stage I to which Gina explained that because the Chariho Act was written before this became State law, we have to align to both. We followed the State requirement for Stage I and Stage II. Once Stage II was submitted, we then can form a building committee; the formation of this must be approved by voters. Ed commented "so we are late" to which Gina responded no, we are doing what we need to do to follow both State law and the Chariho Act. He then asked when the building committee's term will expire. Gina replied it goes for one year after completion of the project. Ed asked what was presented at the Hopkinton Town Council Meeting. Gina noted that it was Stage II that was presented. Ed commented that what was presented was to construct new or renovate to which Gina replied that only the construction of three new elementary school and campus repairs was presented. Mike Colasante from Richmond stated what concerns him about the building committee is the scope of the \$150,000 project which he feels is outside the scope of these people's expertise. Gina noted that State law requires expertise to which Linda Lyall added that it is up to the Towns to appoint people who have expertise. Craig stated that he has been on a building committee and they came in under budget – that is why we hire architects and project managers. Ed Lowe asked if the building committee has sole authority or do they act under the District. Do they do what's right and not what they want? Gina explained that the State has requirements in place that must be followed as they are providing a lot of the funding.

Craig Louzon made a motion, seconded by Karen Reynolds and it was VOTED: To establish a Regional School District Building Committee, which shall be charged with the responsibility and authority as noted in the Warrant. A voice vote confirmed that the ayes were in the majority so the motion passed.

III. Shall the budget of the Chariho Regional School District for the 2024-2025 fiscal year be adjusted so as to allow the transfer of funds from the fund balance in the amount of fifteen thousand (\$15,000) dollars...Moderator Beck explained that this item is to approve seed money for the building committee. Craig Louzon made a motion which was seconded by Karen Reynolds to approve the transfer of \$15,000 from the fund balance. Kathryn Colasante asked if this money would be reimbursable to which Gina replied it would not be as this is per the Chariho Act and is not required by the State. Kathryn questioned who crafted the language as she had some concerns. Gina noted that it was crafted by Jon Anderson and the District Clerk who referred to language that was in past Warrants. Kathryn read part of the language as follows: "Shall the budget of the Chariho Regional School District for the 2024-2025 fiscal year be adjusted so as to allow the transfer of funds from the fund balance in the amount of fifteen thousand (\$15,000) dollars, with any additional amounts deemed necessary in carrying out said Building Committee's approved responsibilities..." and stated her concern is with the language "with any additional amounts deemed necessary in carrying out said Building Committee's approved responsibilities." Gina commented that the Chariho Act requires voters to approve funds for the Building Committee to begin its work. They will need to secure an attorney who will review contracts, bid requests, ads, etc. Tyler asked if the bond passes, this gets rolled into the bond and the money goes back to which Gina replied that any money not used will go back to fund balance. Once the bond passes, the Building Committee will get its funding from the bond. Jessica Swain from Hopkinton questioned if there should be an itemized list to which the District Clerk explained that the Building Committee meetings are public meetings. They are run just like School Committee meetings. They have to vote on the money that is spent. They don't have free reign. The public will be well aware of where the money is going. Jessica Swain asked if this funding is for each town (\$5,000 per town) to which Gina responded that it is for the District - \$5,000 doesn't come from each town. Louise asked if the money could be used for marketing and communication. Can the Committee put together flyers to pass the bond? Gina noted that it could be possible to use it toward flyers to which Craig added that the Building Committee has never done that nor would he be in favor of it. Jim McCabe asked if the \$15,000 is from the bottom line of next year's budget to which Gina replied that it would be from this year's budget. Jim asked if they could go over \$15,000. Gina noted they can't. Deb Carney from Charlestown clarified that you cannot use public funds to advocate for a cause. It has to be neutral. Deb was thanked for clarifying this. Don Panciera asked if there is a limit because it says \$15,000 with any additional amounts deemed necessary. Ned Draper stated the way he interprets this is that \$15,000 can be moved from the

budget but beyond that, it would have to come from the bond. He can only move \$15,000. He cannot move fund balance without a School Committee vote. Sharon Davis noted that Kathryn Colasante did not read the 4<sup>th</sup> line on #3 which states “with any additional amounts deemed necessary in carrying out said Building Committee's approved responsibilities to be approved by vote of the Regional School District Committee”. Any additional money needed would have to be approved by the School Committee. Tyler commented that he thought Gina stated it would have to come back to a meeting like this. Gina clarified that the original start-up money (the \$15,000 that is being voted on) has to be approved by the voters. Any additional money has to be approved by the School Committee.

Craig Louzon made a motion, seconded by Karen Reynolds and it was VOTED: To approve the transfer of \$15,000 from the fund balance, with any additional amounts deemed necessary in carrying out said Building Committee's approved responsibilities to be approved by vote of the Regional School District Committee, for the purpose of providing funds in said amount to the Regional School District Building Committee, which funds are to be used by said Building Committee at its discretion, for necessary and proper expenses it may incur in carrying out said Building Committee's responsibilities as charged by action of the voters of the Regional School District assembled in a Regional School District Meeting; provided however, that any of such funds which are not expended by said Building Committee shall be returned to the General Fund of the Chariho Regional School District. A voice vote confirmed that the ayes were in the majority; the motion passed.

Moderator Beck called for a motion to adjourn. A motion was made by Craig Louzon, seconded by Andrew McQuaide and unanimously approved. The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 PM.

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Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk